

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE STATE AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

May 19, 2020
10:22 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Zack Fields, Co-Chair (via teleconference)
Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, Co-Chair
Representative Grier Hopkins (via teleconference)
Representative Andi Story (via teleconference)

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Steve Thompson
Representative Sarah Vance
Representative Laddie Shaw

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Senator Lora Reinbold

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): VOTE BY MAIL

- HEARD

HOUSE BILL NO. 150

"An Act requiring state elections and local elections that the state is responsible for conducting to be conducted by mail; requiring certain vote-by-mail ballots and election materials to be provided in certain written languages other than English; establishing an online ballot tracking and registration verification system; establishing voting centers and ballot drop boxes; eliminating the use of polling places, absentee ballots, and questioned ballots in certain elections; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 150

SHORT TITLE: VOTING BY MAIL

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) KREISS-TOMKINS

05/01/19 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
05/01/19 (H) STA, JUD, FIN
05/19/20 (H) STA AT 10:00 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

AMBER MCREYNOLDS, CEO
National Vote at Home Institute (NVHI)
Denver, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: During the hearing on HB 150, presented NVHI's best practices policy suggestions for voting by mail.

WENDY UNDERHILL, Director of Elections and Redistricting
National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL)
Denver, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: During the hearing on HB 150, discussed the various adjustments and actions that states are making to their election processes because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

BARBARA JONES, Municipal Clerk and Election Administrator
Municipality of Anchorage
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: During the hearing on HB 150, outlined the municipality's vote-by-mail process that was implemented in 2018.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[10:22:31 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR JONATHAN KREISS-TOMKINS called the House State Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 10:22 a.m. Representatives Story (via teleconference), Hopkins (via teleconference), Fields (via teleconference), and Kreiss-Tomkins were present at the call to order.

PRESENTATION(S): Vote by Mail

[10:23:31 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS announced that the first order of business would be a presentation, entitled "Vote by Mail."

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS explained that vote by mail is of keen interest nationally due to the COVID-19 virus. The governor's [3/11/20] declaration of a public health disaster emergency

provided the director of the Division of Elections with the authority to conduct Alaska's primary and/or general elections by mail. It was recently decided to conduct the primary by mail. Today's witnesses will discuss what vote-by-mail elections might look like and the committee will consider a [proposed] committee substitute (CS) for HB 150.

10:25:21 AM

AMBER MCREYNOLDS, CEO, National Vote at Home Institute (NVHI), noted that states across the U.S. are scrambling to make adjustments to ensure that voters have options. She related that National Vote at Home Institute (NVHI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization, that she was formerly the director of elections for the city and county of Denver, Colorado, and that she served as an election official for 14 years. She was involved in implementing improvements, reforms, and enhancing security for vote-by-mail and vote-at-home programs. In a non-partisan capacity, she further noted, she provided strategic advice and suggestions on how to run and implement best practices in Alaska's recent state party-run primary election for the Democratic side of the isle.

MS. MCREYNOLDS explained that NVHI helps states with policy design and making sure that policies around voting by mail are adopted with best practices in mind, as well as ensuring that security and accessibility are balanced. Recently NVHI did a 50-state analysis in which it analyzed 30 different policy components within each state. The analysis included over 2,000 different metrics and came up with suggestions by state.

MS. MCREYNOLDS advised that NVHI's first and foremost suggestion for Alaska is to modify Alaska's current notary and witness signature requirement to be a signature verification system. This is a recommended best practice, especially in states that predominately vote by mail. Such states all utilize a signature verification system that includes a bipartisan comparison process.

MS. MCREYNOLDS added that the signature verification system also includes a process that notifies a voter when there is an issue [cure process]. This is an important security measure that goes along with good and robust voting-at-home systems.

MS. MCREYNOLDS said the second recommendation for Alaska is to implement ballot-tracking software. This would enable tracking of a voter's ballot from the moment it is printed to when it

goes out for delivery to providing a confirmation [to the voter] of when the ballot is received and processed by an election official. That is an important accountability tool that also enhances security. Tracking has been rolled out in various states, the latest being California. Several different vendors provide and support this type of technology.

MS. MCREYNOLDS said the third recommendation for Alaska is to provide an online way for voters to request an absentee ballot if the state isn't mailing a ballot to everyone. This is more efficient for the voters and also provides a more seamless administrative process for election officials.

MS. MCREYNOLDS said another recommendation is pre-paid postage for envelopes. This best practice eliminates any questions voters might have and enhances security, so voters have the option to return the ballot by mail or to drop it off.

MS. MCREYNOLDS said that, in addition to offering pre-paid postage, NVHI recommends providing 24-hour/7-day a week ("24/7") drop boxes in city or state structures such as libraries, recreation centers, or city halls. This is a best practices option because many voters like to drop off their ballots in person and this preserves their ability to do so.

MS. MCREYNOLDS further advised that a good replacement ballot process is needed so that if a voter moves and doesn't receive a ballot there is a way to resolve that.

MS. MCREYNOLDS offered NVHI's belief that the gold standard is to end the entire election process with risk limiting audits by security experts. An audit was conducted at the end of Alaska's recent primary; it went very well and is a testament to adopting this type of best practice.

10:32:32 AM

MS. MCREYNOLDS, in response to Co-Chair Kreiss-Tomkins, summarized NVHI's suggestions: 1) signature verification; 2) a cure process; 3) ballot tracking solutions; 4) online request process; 5) pre-paid postage for return envelopes; 6) increasing options for ballot returns, which would mean drop boxes; 7) risk-limiting audits; and 8) replacement ballots.

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS noted that all these suggestions are included in the proposed CS being considered today.

10:33:56 AM

REPRESENTATIVE STORY said she has heard concern about voter fraud. She requested further details regarding signature verification and tracking.

MS. MCREYNOLDS replied that for signature verification the voter would sign the affidavit on the envelope. That envelope comes back to the election official and the signature on the envelope is compared to the signature on file that was provided when a voter obtained a driver's license or state identification, or registered to vote, or voted in person. The signature record on any document that has been scanned into [the state's] system can be compared for a match to the signature on the envelope with the ballot. This comparison can be done with equipment that has signature software verification built in. The software compares the reference signature to the others and makes a match within certain criteria. Another way to determine a match is manual comparison, which is done by bipartisan teams of election judges. She said she likes the software scanning process because it is faster and more efficient. Then, if there are signatures that the equipment cannot match, the election judges can do a manual comparison and make a determination.

MS. MCREYNOLDS advised that when a signature doesn't match, the best practice is to have bipartisan agreement that it should be rejected. In Colorado, for instance, a rejection cannot occur unless a Republican and a Democrat both say that the signature doesn't match. The rejection triggers a cure letter and in that cure letter the voter is immediately notified by either text, email, or post letter that the signature did not match. The voter must respond and cure that, meaning the voter must confirm that they did in fact return the ballot and must provide a copy of their identification with that cure letter back into the office. The voter can email this cure letter, or use a text-to-cure platform, or use a return envelope that is provided for return of the affidavit to the office. Normally the best practice is to allow 8-10 days post-election for that cure process to happen.

10:37:30 AM

REPRESENTATIVE STORY requested further explanation about the tracking software.

MS. MCREYNOLDS answered that the ballot tracking software is designed to provide the voter an accountability of where their

ballot is. It is also a great tool for election administrators because on the back end they can also track the ballot through the postal process. The vendor that prints and mails the ballots applies an "intelligent mail bar code" on both the outgoing and return envelopes. Upon drop-off at the post facility, the postal service scans the bar code, and the voter receives a message that the U.S. Postal Service has received the ballot that will be coming to them. On the back end, election officials can verify that all the ballots given to the post office were in fact scanned and are out for delivery. Depending on the postal process for where the ballots are going, there might be an additional scan that the ballot is out with the carrier for delivery on a certain day. When the voter puts the ballot in the return envelope, this process occurs again on the back end - when the post office receives the envelope and the barcode is scanned, a message is triggered telling the voter the post office has processed the ballot and it is on its way back to election officials. The voter gets two final messages - one when the election official has received it and one when the ballot has been accepted, meaning the signature has been verified. If something goes awry with the signature, that system will also immediately notify the voter through text or email that there is an issue, and they must click a link to resolve the issues with the affidavit. The tracking system can also provide other notices. For example, if a voter has moved and not updated their address, the ballot will come back undeliverable and the voter will get a message that they must update their address.

MS. MCREYNOLDS added that the ballot tracking system provides voters with direct accountability and gives election officials the ability on the back end to track everything. If a voter calls with an issue the election official can immediately see where that issue came. Without this ballot tracking system, election officials and voters alike don't have any visibility into the process - all that is known is that it was mailed at the post office and nothing is known beyond that. A ballot tracking system adds accountability, which enhances security.

[10:41:22 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS, in regard to Colorado, inquired about the percentage of signatures that were not accepted. He said he is asking about this to determine whether Alaska's exceedingly slow mail service could impact [the signature cure process].

MS. MCREYNOLDS responded that while she was in Denver [the rejection rate] was an average of about 0.5 percent, a very small number. She stressed the importance of developing statewide standards and training to provide consistency in applying the standards. Each county in a state should go through training on the standards so that all election judges get the same training in policies and procedures. In regard to the 0.5 percent, she said the cure rate varies. How many get cured and how many people respond to [the cure letter] tends to vary by the race and how close that race might be. For example, if it's a "blowout" in a particular election, not as many people may cure. But usually, because the cure process is easy and there are lots of ways to cure, it can be that about 50 percent of those get cured. She explained that a 100 percent cure isn't likely and isn't necessarily wanted since it is a security measure. Some of those that don't get cured are by design - it means the system caught something that shouldn't be, for example, if a new person moves into a house and votes that ballot. Such a situation needs to be caught, so it is appropriate that there isn't a cure. Any signatures that are not cured are reviewed by law enforcement or a district attorney post-election to ensure there isn't any criminal issue. A criminal issue is really rare, but there have been some, and this is something that safeguards the system and ensures that any bad actors are held accountable.

10:44:22 AM

CO-CHAIR FIELDS, in regard to Alaska's primary election, asked whether there are any technical or procedural reasons that Alaska's Division of Elections couldn't be more pro-active about getting ballots out to people so that they can vote at home while still maintaining the capacity to vote in person.

MS. MCREYNOLDS replied that when the laws in Colorado were being written, there were several reasons for restructuring how to deliver elections. Number one was that voters were increasingly asking for vote-by-mail ballots. Given this trend, it was decided to deliver this in a more efficient way. This can be done in a couple different ways. The Colorado style of reform entailed mailing a ballot to every elector while still preserving in-person voting options at voting centers, meaning a voter can go to any voting center location rather than being restricted to only one polling place. She said she likes this model because it cuts down on voters showing up at the wrong polling location if they have moved. Also, in a pandemic situation where polling place adjustments and changes are

sometimes happening really late, providing vote centers is a better way to do it because each center is equipped to serve any voter, making the process more resilient for those last-minute changes to occur. Ms. McReynolds advised that for a state the size of Alaska she would go about sending a ballot to everyone in the state by contracting with a third-party vendor to provide that service, similar to what Rhode Island and Maryland are currently doing. All the envelopes can be the same design for the entire state. An economy of scale is realized and makes it more efficient for the localities because it removes some of the manual burden for the local jurisdictions.

MS. MCREYNOLDS further noted that if a state won't be automatically sending a ballot to each voter, it would be wise to educate the public in a broad way. For example, applications could be sent to each elector so they have an application proactively, or a communication could be sent to electors so they know they can sign up for vote by mail. These processes are currently happening in Michigan, Georgia, and Kentucky.

10:47:48 AM

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS, in regard to signature verification, inquired whether there are issues with the data quality or format of signatures on file with the state for comparison with signatures on vote-by-mail ballots.

MS. MCREYNOLDS answered that while she doesn't know how Alaska handles this, most states scan nearly all documents that come into their system, whether those are voter registration applications, absentee ballot applications, in-person signature cards, or driver's license signatures. All those things are housed and scanned into the voter registration system and kept as a part of a voter file. States that don't have a lot of signatures on file enter into a memorandum of understanding with the department that runs motor vehicle offices to consume the image files from motor vehicle offices and add them into the voter registration database. It usually isn't a difficult technical process to do because it is uploading imagery into the system. Alaska, she presumed, should be able to do this relatively easily because the state is also currently doing that for other types of transactions.

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS noted that the lieutenant governor's office and the Division of Elections declined the committee's invitation to participate in today's hearing. He expressed his hope that the committee will be able to get a lay of the land

about the state's signature data. He thanked Ms. McReynolds for her testimony.

HB 150-VOTING BY MAIL

[10:50:55 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS announced that the next order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 150, "An Act requiring state elections and local elections that the state is responsible for conducting to be conducted by mail; requiring certain vote-by-mail ballots and election materials to be provided in certain written languages other than English; establishing an online ballot tracking and registration verification system; establishing voting centers and ballot drop boxes; eliminating the use of polling places, absentee ballots, and questioned ballots in certain elections; and providing for an effective date."

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS asked for a motion to adopt a committee substitute.

[10:51:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 150, Version 31-LS0311\M, Bullard, 1/10/20, as the working document. There being no objection, Version M was before the committee.

[10:51:30 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS explained that Version M is modeled after the Colorado system, which includes all the provisions discussed by Ms. McReynolds. He noted that Version M has some adaptations for Alaska and the intent is to parse through the language to refine and improve the legislation's substance so as to create an optimal policy document that the legislature will be positioned to act on in the future.

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS announced that HB 150 was held over.

PRESENTATION(S): Vote by Mail

[10:52:37 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS announced that the final order of business would be a return to the presentation, entitled "Vote by Mail."

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS invited the next witness, Ms. Underhill, to discuss how states and legislatures across the U.S. are navigating elections during this [coronavirus ("COVID-19")] pandemic and the measures the states are taking to protect public health while still ensuring the seamless administration of elections.

10:53:26 AM

WENDY UNDERHILL, Director of Elections and Redistricting, National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), noted that NCSL is the nation's bipartisan organization that serves the needs of legislators and legislative staff throughout the U.S. and its territories. She related that as a Colorado voter she has personal experience with the voting described by Ms. McReynolds. For example, at age 16 her daughter pre-registered to vote, using a signature with nice, rounded letters and distinct individual letters. However, by the time her daughter went to vote for the first time at age 18, she had changed her signature to just a slash. This was caught and her daughter was notified of the signature problem and given the opportunity to fix it. Ms. Underhill said she was pleased to see that the system did work. She further related that she signed up for ballot tracking and subsequently received texts on her cell phone throughout the steps of the tracking process.

MS. UNDERHILL explained that NCSL's work is informational, which means it doesn't offer advice on policy matters that come before state legislatures, but NCSL does sometimes lobby at the national level in Washington, DC. She said NCSL provides a 50-state perspective on key topics and the one topic right now seems to be how to conduct elections in a safe manner for voters and poll workers given the coronavirus. All states are making adjustments to their election process because of the coronavirus and in large part that is because voters are making adjustments in how they choose to vote. As long as the coronavirus appears to be a risk, voters will be deciding for themselves whether they want to use absentee voting or vote-by-mail to avoid going to a polling place. As the voters have shifted, the states have shifted. States are faced with the need to scale up their existing processes or to adopt new processes in record time. So far, most of those shifts have come through the executive branch and yet legislatures are where election policy is generally

created. Legislatures are now starting to take the lead again and Alaska's legislature is at the front end of that wave.

MS. UNDERHILL reviewed four categories of actions that states have taken so far; the categories aren't mutually exclusive, and some states are doing more than one of them. In the first category, she said, 18 states have postponed their primary or other kind of election, with most of these being elections that were scheduled for April or May and that will now take place in June or July. Of these postponements the majority were presidential or state primaries, but a few states have also delayed state primaries or municipal elections. Alaska was not part of that postponement trend because its state primary is late in the season on August 18; only six states hold their state primary later than does Alaska.

MS. UNDERHILL said the second category is that a number of states are making it easier to request absentee ballots, which in essence is a way to encourage mail voting without having to make a sweeping policy change or enact new laws. This category can take several forms. For instance, of the 16 states that require voters to provide an excuse to get an absentee ballot, about half have declared that fear of COVID-19 is an acceptable reason under their laws. Eleven states have taken the novel step of mailing absentee ballot applications to all registered voters for primary elections. With this decision to send a ballot application, it remains the voter's responsibility to request the ballot according to whatever the existing state law is. Mailing out an absentee ballot application can be seen as the middle ground between running elections as usual and moving to mostly mail elections. Sending applications to all voters does require resources, but there is reason to think that coronavirus will make elections more expensive this year no matter what decisions are made. The application mailing itself may serve to both give election officials new information for list maintenance purposes and to ensure that only those people who want a mail ballot will have one sent to them when election time arrives.

MS. UNDERHILL added that creating an online portal for the application process is another way to make it easier for voters to get an absentee ballot. With a ballot request portal, a voter can request a mail ballot without exchanging a paper form with a local election official. After the portal is set up, it is expected to reduce the cost of managing absentee ballots because no mailing is required and processing times for each request will be much reduced compared with managing paper

applications. In addition, human error will be reduced. Four states have either created online portals or now plan to do so, bringing the total to 14 states that are providing this avenue and she expects to see more of that moving forward. Ms. Underhill advised that NCSL could electronically provide the committee with its report titled "Voting Outside the Polling Place," which outlines many of the policy choices she is presenting today.

MS. UNDERHILL said the third category is mail-in ballots, not just ballot applications to all voters. Five states already had this as their standard operating procedure before COVID-19 hit. She noted that she used to refer to these as the "all-mail" election states but now she is calling them the "mostly-mail" election states because even when ballots are sent to all registered voters, states still maintain some kind of Election Day operation, such as vote centers, to assist voters who haven't received their ballot or who have another kind of issue, or for same-day registration, and for anyone who has moved within the jurisdiction and needs to update their registration. In addition to the five states, California's governor has, by executive order, directed that November's election be conducted via mailing ballots to all voters. Montana's governor issued a directive that gave all counties the authority to decide if they would like to conduct this year's June 2nd state primary by mail and all counties elected to do so. Maryland, Nevada, and New Jersey have moved to a mostly-mail primary. Nebraska, North Dakota, and California prior to this year's directive, allow counties to decide on their own whether to conduct their elections by mail. Ten of Nebraska's counties used mail for their primaries and North Dakota's governor signed a directive that strongly encouraged counties to do so for the primary. When looking at the aforementioned states on a map, a geographic trend of mostly western states can be seen, with the exception of Maryland and New Jersey. For the most part, voters have been pleased to have the option to vote at home, but of course not all people feel the same and there may be some categories of voters who are disadvantaged by mail voting. One of these groups is Native Americans, but she doesn't whether that extends to Alaska Natives. Other groups who may not be easily served by mail voting are those who move often, who are homeless, anyone with low literacy, and some, but not all, people with disabilities.

MS. UNDERHILL outlined why more states aren't likely to move to mostly-mail elections this year. She said one reason is that making a shift can be hard to do depending on what a state's

voting process looks like at this moment. For example, if many people are already voting by mail, then processes are probably already in place that can be scaled up. But if voting by mail is still a very small portion of all voting, then scaling up presents some challenges. States that have moved to mostly-mail elections got there over a course of years with policies that have been encouraging mail voting, such as creating a permanent absentee voting list. She offered her understanding that Alaska has gotten to the point that a voter only has to ask once to be able to receive mail ballots for all elections in that year.

MS. UNDERHILL highlighted the four topics that states should address as they are preparing to go to more mail. First is that the signature on the outside of the return envelope is checked against signatures on file. Second is the ability to begin to process, but not count, these ballots before Election Day. This is because a huge pile of ballots could arrive on Election Day and everyone would be sorting, opening, and scanning, and so results could be delayed. Third is to have a way for a voter to be contacted. Fourth is that mail ballots can be reported at a precinct level and not only reported at an aggregate level. This is appreciated by candidates and campaign managers as a way to know more precisely where their voters can be found, which helps with their campaigning.

MS. UNDERHILL said the fourth category is that all states are striving to make polling places safer. Measures include moving from touched screen machines, to using paper ballots, to giving every voter their own pen to vote with, to working out the details of drive-through voting. Other measures include the marking of six-foot intervals for voters waiting in line and providing poll workers with masks and gloves.

MS. UNDERHILL commented that the maintenance of high voter confidence in election processes is very important. Anything states can do to assure voters that their votes are going to be counted correctly regardless of how the ballots are delivered to the voter or delivered back to the election official is important. This means that voter education may be more important than it ever has been before.

11:06:16 AM

CO-CHAIR FIELDS requested Ms. Underhill to speak to the transition time for the Montana counties that went to a vote-at-home system. He further inquired how the respective divisions of elections implemented that and what the timeline was. He

said he is thinking about Alaska's primary election this year and the steps that Alaska's Division of Elections will need to take to make it easier for people to vote at home.

MS. UNDERHILL responded that election officials in Montana are the county clerks and they have favored moving to mostly-mail elections for some time. Over the course of years, they have been encouraging people to choose to vote by absentee or mail ballots, so the percentage of voters doing so in Montana is already pretty high and the processes are in place. She offered to check with the state election director in Montana should Co-Chair Fields like further details.

11:07:43 AM

REPRESENTATIVE STORY asked whether Ms. Underhill has any suggestions for mechanisms that could be used to help alleviate any problems with voting by mail for disadvantaged groups.

MS. UNDERHILL replied that having some amount of in-person voting is probably the best way to work with that situation so there is a place for people to go to vote on Election Day. This way, any problems can be handled in-person on Election Day. Because each of the disadvantaged groups is unique, voter education is important here, as is working with people who are advocates or leaders for these groups.

11:09:15 AM

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS asked why there are concerns about access to voting-by-mail/voting-at-home in "Indian Country."

MS. UNDERHILL answered that oftentimes addresses are not handled the same on a reservation as they are elsewhere, and most people receive their mail at post office boxes instead of a box at their house. The problem is that there aren't enough postal boxes, so several families may be sharing one postal box and a person's ballot may not be there for them. On the Navajo reservation in Arizona, people live many miles away from their post box and may only get into town once or twice a month to get their mail. During parts of the year the roads are impassable, making it tricky sometimes to get one's ballot. There are ways to work on the addressing, she advised. North Dakota has worked to some extent on having a way to identify something that doesn't have a street and a number, such as looking at a geographic map and pointing to where the house is. On the Navajo reservation, she continued, voting has often been a

community day that takes place at the tribal headquarters, perhaps with a party that goes along with it, and so there is a cultural piece there as well. Also coming into play is that depending on the Native American group, people could be fluent in their own language but have literacy problems in English.

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS noted that the aforementioned has parallels to the Alaska Native community.

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS invited the next witness, Ms. Jones, to share the Municipality of Anchorage's experience with adopting a vote-at-home policy and to discuss whether any of the infrastructure developed by Anchorage could serve the State of Alaska's statewide needs, should that be asked for.

11:12:51 AM

BARBARA JONES, Municipal Clerk and Election Administrator, Municipality of Anchorage, explained that the Anchorage Assembly established vote-by-mail in Anchorage in 2016 as a strategy to increase voter turnout and empower Anchorage residents. Three things occurred during the time period between 2016 and the 2018 implementation of vote-by-mail: 1) a Request for Proposals; 2) the leasing of an updated, functional, secure space; and 3) updating of the municipal code. In the Request for Proposals there were three key functions. The first was a mail sorter and signature verification system. The second was a ballot scanning and tabulation system. The third was a printing and mailing vendor. Getting the Request for Proposals done, and making sure it was done right, took up the bulk of this time period. In regard to which, if any, of those could be used by the State of Alaska, it is interesting to note that the state has exactly the same ballot scanning and tabulation system as does the Municipality of Anchorage. The state's mail sorter system is different than the municipality's system. The signature verification system used by the municipality ingests signatures from the State of Alaska voter registration base. She said she believes the State of Alaska also has that capacity, but she doesn't know the exact relationship. Using the voter information from the State of Alaska database, the municipality assigns unique ballot package identification to each voter, then submits that to the vendor that prints, inserts, and mails the ballot packages from its secure facility to each registered voter in Anchorage. In regard to this system, she said she doesn't know what the state's capacity is for doing that.

MS. JONES said Anchorage's vote-by-mail system is very similar to what was discussed by the previous two speakers. The municipality provides the information it gets from the state to the printing and mailing vendor and the vendor then mails a ballot package to every registered voter. The municipality accepts the return ballot envelopes via mail, via 18 secure drop boxes, as well as via its vote centers. In the past the municipality had six vote centers, but this year due to COVID-19 the municipality only had one. The municipality runs the ballots through its mail sorter, which checks for duplicates, the required identification, and other issues with the envelope. The municipality verifies the signature on the envelope against the signatures in the State of Alaska voter registration system. After signature verification, the municipality opens the envelopes and separates the ballots in the confidential manner that the municipality has done with absentee-by-mail envelopes for 40 years and as done by the state for absentee ballots. After the ballots are separated from the envelopes, the municipality runs them through the high-speed scanners and then on election night tabulates the numbers and reports the results, which is the same system that the state has.

11:17:54 AM

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS asked whether the Municipality of Anchorage has experienced any fraud associated with its vote-by-mail/vote-at-home system.

MS. JONES responded that this is a difficult question because as discussed by the prior speakers, Anchorage has a cure process. If someone has a signature that doesn't match, they get a cure letter. Municipal code requires that a cure notification be sent within three days of processing the envelope. The municipality's statistics are very similar to the ones mentioned by Ms. McReynolds; the municipality's cure rate is about 50 percent. Some envelopes were not cured, but as was said by Ms. McReynolds, maybe they all shouldn't be cured. In the past there have been a couple of envelopes of concern that were discussed with the municipal attorney. One of those was at a vote center, so it was a live situation and not vote-by-mail. It was reported to the Anchorage Election Commission and the commission asked that it be moved forward. The second one was a vote-by-mail situation where it appeared that a senior voted both the senior and junior mail ballot envelopes that were sent to the same address. Those are the only two situations she's had, and she reports those to the assembly every year. There were a couple more this year, including one that stated, "Voted

by Facebook live," and she presumes that it was due to COVID-19 as this hasn't been seen before. Since it was an invalid signature, it was rejected for lack of signature, but it wasn't believed to be fraud.

11:20:28 AM

CO-CHAIR FIELDS asked what the first things would be that Ms. Jones would do, based on her knowledge of the state's system, to make implementing a State of Alaska vote-at-home system as successful as possible.

MS. JONES answered that one thing would be to send out absentee-by-mail applications to every registered voter. That is how people get to make a choice as to whether they want to vote at home. Second, the Municipality of Anchorage sent a postcard to voters to make sure the municipality had their correct mailing address. Voter addresses sometimes need updating, but when people go to polling stations their address doesn't really matter. So, sending a postcard is step that could be considered for a vote-at-home system. A third step that could be considered, and which may be more of a long-term process, is that a voter in Alaska can register to get an absentee ballot this year and can request a ballot for either or both the primary and general elections. She suggested that there also be an option to permanently request an absentee ballot. For example, some Alaska voters are snowbirds that are gone from the state every year in November. A permanent absentee list could be really helpful to voters.

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS noted there was legislation this last session that would have established a permanent absentee-by-mail setup, but it didn't make it through the process.

11:24:12 AM

REPRESENTATIVE STORY noted the lieutenant governor decided not to do the primary election with vote-by-mail. She requested Ms. Jones to elaborate on why vote-by-mail might be more difficult with Alaska's closed and party-run primary system.

MS. JONES apologized for being unable to elaborate. She explained that the Municipality of Anchorage is non-partisan so that it is not an issue for her. However, she continued, based on research and trips to the Lower 48 for the municipality, she knows that other jurisdictions do conduct primaries by vote-by-

mail. She recommended the committee contact Thurston County in the state of Washington to get further information.

[11:25:28 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS inquired about the amount of change in voter turnout after the municipality's adoption of vote-at-home.

MS. JONES responded that the municipality's turnout was in the high teens to low twenties and now it is in the low thirties or low twenties, so a 5 to 10 percent increase. She said she thinks a bump is being seen because vote-at-home is easier for voters. Further, the municipality's voter registration is much larger with 232,000 registered voters in Anchorage, which is pretty close to its adult population. However, she noted, it is thought that this voter registration number may be a bit high because people have moved and not provided notice to the state that they aren't living in Alaska anymore.

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS pointed out that automatic voter registration and the permanent fund dividend took effect at the same time. He asked how many ballots were being cast in municipal elections before and after vote-at-home.

MS. JONES replied that the number was around 50,000 before vote-at-home. In 2018 it was 79,000, and this year it is about 72,000.

[11:27:35 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS asked whether he is accurate in concluding that the quality of signatures in the State of Alaska's voter registration database was sufficient to administer the signature verification process.

MS. JONES confirmed the conclusion is accurate; the signatures are excellent. She explained that when the municipality has signatures for which it doesn't have a reference signature in its downloaded State of Alaska voter registration database, the municipality contacts the state and has an excellent partnership with the state. For example, in 2019 the municipality contacted the state for over 200 signatures that it didn't have on file and the State of Alaska found all but one. The municipality assumes that the one signature was someone who registered online and never provided the data that was needed.

CO-CHAIR KREISS-TOMKINS opined that voter-by-mail/vote-at-home is often seen through a possible partisan or political image of concern. He said he is putting on record the April 15, 2020, study from the Stanford Democracy and Polarization Lab within the Institute for Economic Policy Research. It is titled "The Neutral Partisan Effects of Vote by Mail, Evidence from 2011 Rollout." The study compared the political and partisan results of elections in the different counties that had administered rollouts for before and after their vote-by-mail rollouts. It was found that turnout increased but there was not any partisan advantage to one party or another. He urged that the committee and Alaskans keep this study in mind.

[11:31:01 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House State Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 11:31 a.m.